

# Connecting with Communities



Carbondale, Colorado - Photo by Tyler Stableford ©



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**Strategy:** The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) will reposition the resources of the Recreation & Visitor Services Program to achieve social, economic, and environmental goals of local communities and provide more benefits for mutually shared customers.

**Vision:** By increasing and improving collaboration with community networks of service providers, the BLM will help communities produce greater well-being and socioeconomic health and will deliver outstanding recreation experiences to visitors while sustaining the distinctive character of public lands recreation settings.

**Strategic Focus:** Externally, the BLM will capitalize on its recreation brand of America's "Backyard to Backcountry" treasure, consistently coordinating with community and regional landscape-level representatives when planning and managing recreation settings, services, and facilities; prioritize recreation areas that provide the most significant public benefits; and leverage financial resources through community partner organizations to ensure that top-priority sites and services are maintained.

Internally, the BLM will train and maintain a recreation workforce capable of engaging productively in community relations and identifying outcomes to benefit communities and visitors alike; revise internal processes to provide greater support for a community-centered approach and better information for decisionmaking; improve communication and outreach efforts; and use traditional and alternative funding sources as efficiently and effectively as possible.



**Locally Based Government Agencies** include municipal and county governments, the National Association of Counties, tribal governments, state and regional agencies, other federal agencies, schools, etc.

**Private Sector Industry and Business** includes outfitters and tour operators, lodging and restaurants, nature and youth centers, chambers of commerce, tourism industry associations, sporting goods and retail, other nongovernmental organizations, etc.

**Acknowledgments:** This strategy was developed under the guidance of the BLM's Recreation and Visitor Services Advisory Team (RVSAT). RVSAT advises BLM management regarding recreation and visitor services priorities, policies, programs, and budget. Chartered in 2004, the advisory group is composed of the 12 BLM state office recreation leads, BLM's deputy chief of the Recreation & Visitor Services Division, and representatives from BLM's Engineering Advisory Team and National Landscape Conservation System. RVSAT also advises staffs of the National Training Center and National Operations Center.

The Recreation Strategy Team gratefully acknowledges the contribution of the RVSAT members, as well as the continuing support of the BLM's Executive Leadership Team.

Recreation Strategy Team members include: Cathi Bailey, Anthony Bobo, Don Bruns, Dave Howell, Bill Overbaugh, Andy Tenney, and Angela West.

# Recreation & Visitor Services Program

## Background

The BLM's Recreation & Visitor Services Program manages recreation resources and visitor services to offer the greatest benefits possible to individuals and communities and to better enable communities to achieve their own desired social, economic, and environmental outcomes. Recreation is one of the “[a]uthorized activities on public lands [that] produce income and provide valuable commodities, services, and opportunities for the American people,” as described in the BLM’s national strategy, “Winning the Challenges of the Future: A Road Map for Success in 2016” (hereinafter referred to as the “national strategy”). The BLM manages its programs to provide a variety of benefits to the American taxpayer and to communities, consistent with the national strategy’s guidance that “[t]he public should receive the greatest return” from allowable activities on public lands.

The BLM spends funds appropriated from Congress efficiently, striving to provide at no additional cost to the recreating public a wide variety of developed and dispersed opportunities. At the same time, legislation such as the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (2004) and prior acts allow the BLM to charge modest fees for amenities at many developed sites. The BLM diligently applies these funds to uses at the sites where they were collected to demonstrate to members of the public how their fees are being used. The BLM also charges fees, and in some cases recovers additional administrative costs, for special recreation permits associated with specific events and activities. Tremendous additional value—critical to the success of the recreation program—is derived from partners and volunteers, who multiply the BLM’s available resources as they accomplish work with tangible benefits on the ground.

This strategic plan aligns the resources of the BLM’s Recreation & Visitor Services Program with the desired outcomes of local communities, businesses, and other service providers (as consistent with federal law and policy) to deliver as many benefits as possible to the recreating public. It does so while respecting the unique character of public lands recreation settings and making the most of the BLM’s recreation brand. Central to the success of this revised strategy are collaboration with community networks of service providers and improvements in the BLM’s internal processes and training.



## Collaboration with Community Networks of Service Providers

Community networks of service providers are the driving forces in our cities and towns. These networks include locally based government agencies at all levels (city, county, tribal, state, and federal). Private sector industries and businesses are also key service providers, including outfitters, tour operators, lodging, restaurants, nature and youth centers, chambers of commerce, tourism industry associations, sporting goods and retail stores, and other nongovernmental organizations.

The Recreation & Visitor Services Program has adopted an outcome-focused approach to planning and management. This approach requires coordination with public and private visitor service providers (1) to manage recreation settings, services, and facilities, and (2) to provide positive recreation experiences and outcomes. Central to this framework is the understanding that the BLM is only one of a number of providers in the community network, all of whom can benefit individually and collectively from collaboration in ways not possible through separate efforts. Partnership in community networks will enable the BLM to manage public lands recreation resources to deliver the social, economic, and environmental gains described below.



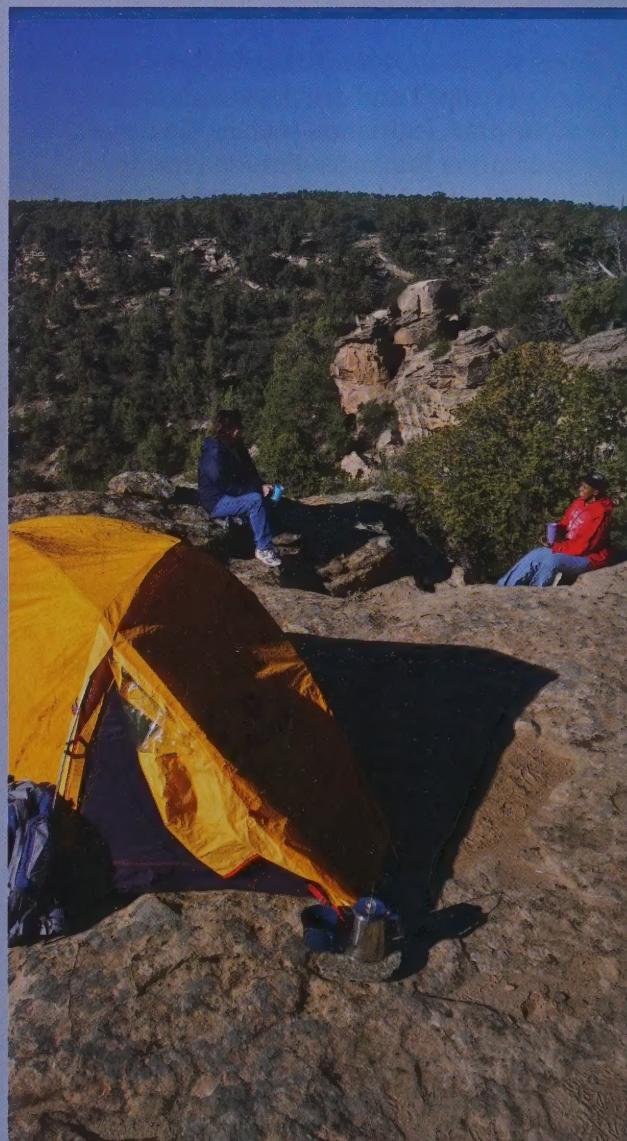
**Social Outcomes:** Recreation contributes to social well-being by adding value to people's quality of life. At the individual level, people may experience a greater sense of self-reliance, an improved sense of resource stewardship, a greater respect for culture, reduced stress, improved physical health, and reduced health maintenance needs. Families and communities may experience greater cohesion and well-being as a result of recreation experiences—especially when youth are encouraged to connect with the outdoors. Not only do recreation experiences improve quality of life, but they strengthen positive social connections and may even reduce juvenile delinquency. Participation in community networks also reinforces cultural values tied to community identity.

**Economic Outcomes:** A strong local economy contributes to the overall success of retail outlets, outfitters and tour operators, lodging, restaurants, nature and youth centers, chambers of commerce, tourism industry associations, and many more. A 2012 report by the Outdoor Foundation concluded that the total economic activity from outdoor sports in the United States is nearly \$646 billion a year and that it generates 6.1 million jobs across the country. Outdoor recreation spending is greater than consumer spending in pharmaceuticals (\$331 billion), motor vehicles and parts (\$340 billion), gasoline and other fuels (\$354 billion), and household utilities spending (\$309 billion). A 2011 Department of the Interior (DOI) report on the BLM's economic contribution stated that BLM recreation initiatives provided more than \$2.7 billion in revenue to the private sector and a total of \$7 billion in direct and indirect revenue—and these numbers are increasing annually. It therefore makes good sense to leverage the BLM's recreation visitor service resources within community service networks that are already engaged and invested in serving our shared customers.

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Denver Federal Center  
Bldg 50, OC-521  
P.O. Box 25047  
Denver CO 80225**

**Environmental Outcomes:** A healthy environment contributes to the users' positive recreation experience by helping to reduce vandalism and looting; by retaining distinctive natural landscape features and preserving historic sites; by contributing to improved soil, water, and air health; by encouraging better stewardship of natural resources; and by helping maintain a community's distinctive character.

Participation in community networks can help the BLM accomplish a key goal of the national strategy—to "ensure the long-term sustainability of the public's land" (a goal described in the national strategy as "Do It Right the First Time"). In addition, enforcement of environmental laws, in partnership with other federal, state, and local entities, improves the quality of the experience for recreation-tourism visitors and sustains setting characteristics and the sense of place that communities value.



# Why This Strategy and Why Now?

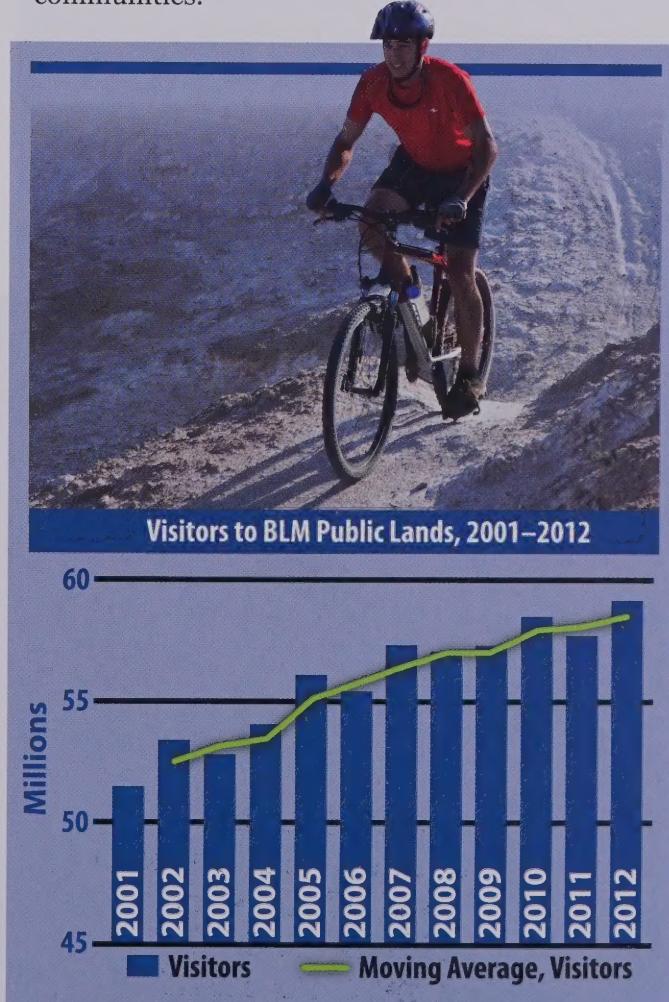
This strategy provides a framework for BLM offices at all levels to develop action plans that will increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the BLM's Recreation & Visitor Services Program by more fully integrating with community-based service delivery systems. The strategy repositions all program resources—recreation setting management and visitor services, program funding, operational knowledge and skills, and the BLM culture and brand—to support community values. Consistent with the BLM's national strategy, this recreation strategy revises and refines program objectives to achieve recreation-tourism outcomes that communities value most, while capitalizing on the inherent advantages of the BLM's unique recreation brand.

The BLM public lands—once described as “the lands nobody wanted”—are now recognized as America's Great Outdoors, a “Backyard-to-Backcountry” treasure. Moreover, these lands are uniquely positioned, close to both rural and urban communities and intermingled with lands managed by state and local governments and others. More than 120 urban centers in the western United States and thousands of rural towns are located within 25 miles of BLM lands, according to data from the 2010 census. Although many in the past have viewed this intermingling of public lands with state, county, and private lands as a weakness, this ready accessibility to public lands actually creates a unique recreation-tourism product, a distinctive niche in the federal recreation marketplace that offers a competitive advantage. This proximity to varied stakeholders can also be viewed as a great strength in that opportunities abound to pool resources for the common good. In fact, the BLM has always fostered close relationships with community groups, boards, and councils. This strategy takes the next step by reaching out to locally based government agencies (city, county, tribal, state, and federal) and service provider businesses, emphasizing benefits to community networks.

The need for collaborative relationships with community networks of service providers is only growing as communities expand and as demands increase for open space recreation. The 2010 census showed that at least 64 million people live within 100 miles of BLM-managed lands in the western continental United States. The Outdoor Industry Association noted “that the outdoor recreation economy grew approximately 5 percent annually between 2005 and 2011—this

during an economic recession when many sectors contracted.” Between 2001 and 2012, estimated visitors to public lands increased from 51 million to 59 million. Yet, even as recreation demand may grow during economic recessions, government agencies at all levels (federal, state, and local) feel a continued budget pinch long after a recession ends.

Community service provider networks are considered a high-leverage “game changer” for building capacity, gaining community support, and growing capabilities in the face of tough economic times. Such networks enable all providers to leverage funding and staffing for maximum effect, and they promote innovation and the exchange of ideas. Repositioning the BLM as a key collaborator within such networks will enable the agency to improve visitor experiences by increasing the quantity and quality of recreation services and benefits; to make the management of recreation settings more efficient and sustainable; and to contribute to greater social, economic, and environmental benefits for communities.



# I. External Repositioning Strategy

Public lands should be viewed as connected to and integrated with communities—part of a greater whole—not as federally designated islands separated from them. By developing closer ties to and greater mutual accountability with communities that the BLM serves, the recreation program will help achieve the national strategy goal “Be a Good Neighbor,” while improving service capacity, efficiency, and effectiveness. Repositioning of program resources to support a community network approach should focus on the following goals:

## **Goal 1. Reposition the Recreation Program within Community Service Provider Networks To Better Serve Mutually Shared Customers.**

Strategic Focus 1: Proactively Engage with Community Networks of Service Providers.

Typically, the BLM has engaged with recreation partners when opportunities have presented themselves for specific activities. BLM leadership has determined that the agency, at all levels, should be less reactive and should devote the necessary resources to making sustained efforts to identify and develop outcome-focused partnerships with community networks of service providers as a matter of good business. Similarly, the BLM intends to facilitate community engagement by creating and maintaining partnerships and agreements with regional and national service provider networks as well.



Strategic Focus 2: Plan and Manage Recreation Efforts To Achieve Specific and Desired Benefits to the Community.

It is widely accepted that recreation and tourism are good for community well-being and socioeconomic health. However, until public lands recreation is objectively planned and managed to achieve those beneficial end-results with community partners, most of those benefits will languish in the intuitive realm and be largely unrealized. As noted under “Internal Repositioning Strategy” below, doing so demands that the BLM train and maintain a recreation workforce able to engage productively with network providers, to understand and respond to community values and quality of life issues, and to identify recreation opportunities that meet the changing needs of communities as well as increasing public demands for recreation experiences and beneficial outcomes.

## **Goal 2. Facilitate Greater Well-Being and Economic Benefits within Communities.**

Even as BLM partnership efforts emphasize social and economic benefits to communities, they must also sustain the distinctive character of public lands recreation settings upon which community benefits depend. Partnering with communities at the landscape level, across administrative boundaries, will help the BLM do so—accomplishing the national strategy goal of “Thinking Big.” Partnership in community networks will also help the BLM focus on its recreation brand and develop systematic plans that maximize the most significant shared benefits, without trying to be “all things to all people.” The BLM has various mechanisms by which to recognize and manage important recreation settings. These include Special Recreation Management Areas (SRMAs) for high-value recreation opportunities, where recreation is the principal resource value, and Extensive Recreation Management Areas (ERMAs) for locations where recreation use, while important and potentially high profile, is one of many shared uses allowed. The BLM will give priority attention to managing SRMAs first.

## Strategic Focus 1: Capitalize On and Protect the BLM’s “Backyard to Backcountry” Recreation Brand.

The diversity of backcountry getaways on public lands—from mountain and arctic landscapes, to prairies, to river and lake settings—and the proximity of many of these areas to vibrant communities is what makes the BLM’s “brand” of recreation so distinctive and unique. This ease of accessibility to the backcountry from the backyard is a strength on which the BLM should capitalize. The development of unnecessary recreation facilities, however, is a threat to the BLM’s recreation brand. Recreation facility and trail development should normally be limited to those projects that are consistent with the character of recreation settings and that help meet key needs of network providers, such as providing important portal facilities and maintaining top-priority sites and services.

## Strategic Focus 2: Create Collaborative Recreation Management Plans.

The Resource Management Plan (RMP) process currently guides the BLM in performing public outreach, formalizing recreation objectives and desired outcomes, and maintaining the open space character of the public lands. Under this strategy, the RMP process will continue to allow BLM field managers the flexibility to choose priorities

and to determine, with the help of partners in community networks, which recreation activities to support.

To be most effective, the BLM’s recreation plans for community network opportunities will carefully analyze and weigh (1) the outcome-based objectives of all participants, (2) recreation setting characteristic inventories (to help maintain conditions essential to achieving objectives), and (3) a mutually developed list of essential visitor services (not only to achieve objectives and maintain settings, but also, initially, to determine whether new facilities are warranted). Recreation proposals will be coordinated with interdisciplinary teams to consider the short- and long-term effects of the proposals on the environment, and apply the appropriate laws and policies that pertain to environmental analyses. Such coordination is consistent with the BLM’s national strategy goal of ensuring the sustainability of public lands.

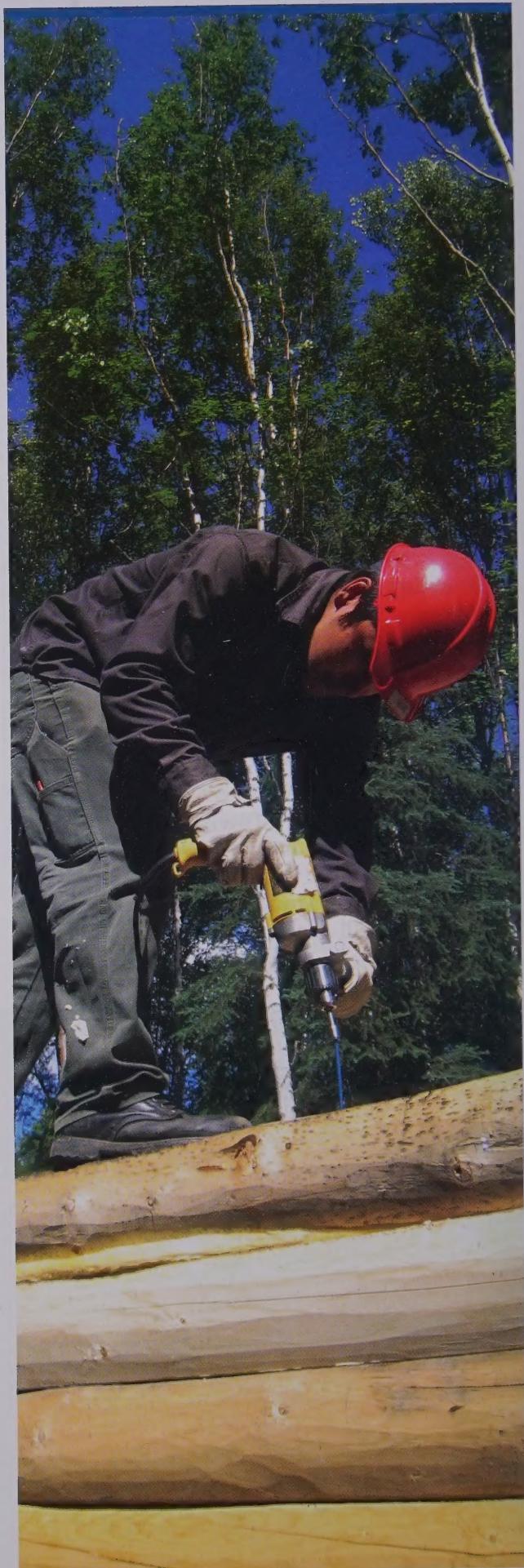
Once a decision is made on desired recreation outcomes, implementation plans will be developed. As envisioned by BLM leadership, these plans will identify the complementary group actions and administrative support necessary to manage, market, and monitor these recreation opportunities. The plans will be adaptable documents that allow the BLM to “work collaboratively with partners at different scales to...readily address the rapidly changing environment and conditions,” consistent with the BLM’s national strategy.



### Strategic Focus 3: Give Priority to Those Recreation Opportunities That Promise the Most Significant Social and Economic Benefits, That Are within the Productive Capacity of the Community's Delivery Systems, and That Best Fit the Character/Setting of Place-Based Recreation.

To make investments in recreation as efficient and effective as possible, decisions about whether to develop new recreation opportunities must seek the greatest benefits possible—both in terms of visitor demand for the BLM's unique recreation brand, and in terms of the potential to create significant socioeconomic benefits for communities near the affected public lands. In particular, priority should be given to sustainable service-providing businesses that support both visitor and local resident recreation needs (e.g., food, lodging, fuel, equipment sales and repair, clothing, and other necessities). The BLM's recreation program can, on a year-round basis, help sustain desirable communities, promote more vibrant local economies, and protect environmental values on public lands and within communities to “Work for America,” as envisioned in the national strategy. The BLM will need to continue working with volunteers (individuals and organizations) to accomplish priority work. To the extent practicable and allowable by federal laws, the BLM will also work with local businesses and governments to contribute jobs to the local economy by, for example, hiring local youth as seasonal staff members to maintain sites, contracting with local construction companies for site improvements, and using local suppliers for materials.

Sustaining the productive capacity of public lands recreation settings and working within the productive capacity of the community service delivery systems is an indispensable pairing of goals for this recreation strategy. Identifying recreation efforts that fit this paradigm must be a collaborative effort between the BLM and the community network of providers with whom the bureau seeks to partner. Prioritizing investments to support these types of recreation opportunities can be expected to provide significant quality of life, social, and economic benefits for visitors, community residents, and businesses.



## II. Internal Repositioning Strategy

Not only is the BLM in a unique position to benefit communities by adopting an external repositioning strategy; it also can reposition resources internally to support that strategy, and to complement other bureau missions (e.g., cultural and heritage resources, and wildlife programs), as described in the following goals.

### **Goal 1. Deepen the Knowledge and Skill Base Needed for Maximizing Partnership Opportunities.**

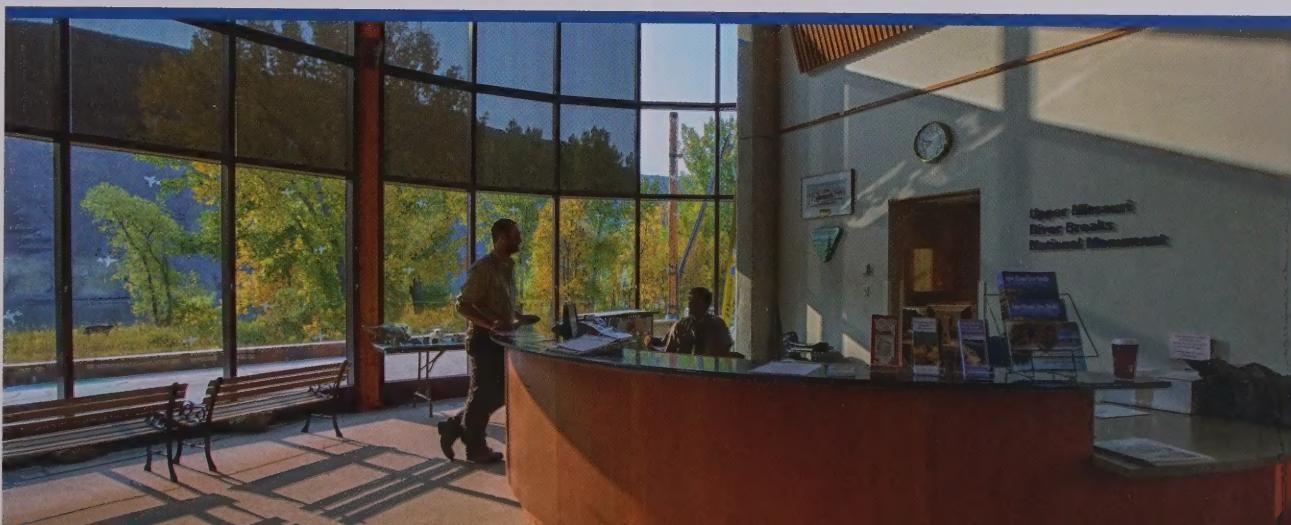
The BLM has a dedicated field staff of outstanding outdoor recreation planners, recreation technicians, and park rangers, supported by field office managers and others. Field staff interact daily with members of the public and various organizations in their communities, and are often asked to respond to questions about non-recreation matters that nevertheless affect the overall health and well-being of communities. Currently, however, an insufficient number of BLM recreation specialists at the field office level possess (1) knowledge of socioeconomic and quality of life issues in their communities, and (2) skills to facilitate bureau engagement with community networks of service providers (not only participating effectively in partnerships but seeking them out or creating them). The BLM recognizes that it must align internal budget and human resources policies (e.g., recruitment, retention, and training), as well as planning practices, to support the development of the needed knowledge and skills.

#### **Strategic Focus 1: Provide Enhanced Skills Training.**

The Recreation & Visitor Services Program will offer training that not only encompasses current, vital recreation planning skills, but also provides techniques for gaining an understanding of community social and economic values and quality of life issues, as well as skills for creating, facilitating, and maintaining effective partnerships. Ideally, training will result in collaborations that correctly anticipate public demands for recreation experiences and beneficial outcomes—both in the short term and long term—and that quickly respond to changes when needed.

#### **Strategic Focus 2: Encourage Knowledge-Sharing.**

The BLM will continue to encourage and facilitate sharing of knowledge and best management practices beyond the agency's administrative boundaries to promote needed diversification of recreation staff knowledge and skills. Remarkable expertise and innovation in harnessing the power of communities and service providers already thrives among the staffs of certain BLM field offices. Those innovators constitute a wonderful core resource for training and information about how to collaborate well. Accordingly, the recreation program will encourage veteran recreation planners to share information and to train and mentor less-experienced recreation staff members.





## Goal 2. Ensure That BLM Participation in Partnerships Remains Relevant and Effective.

Strategic Focus 1: Stay Up-to-Date about the Interests of Network Providers and Primary Recreation-Tourism Visitors.

Maintaining a focus on the needs and desires of the community and of visitors will keep partnerships vital and relevant. Consequently, BLM leadership will expect field staff to engage in ongoing, structured conversations with network providers and with the public in affected communities to find out what matters most and how well the bureau is supporting their interests. In-depth visitor assessments will also enable field staff to evaluate and measure how well the partnership is meeting the public's desired outcomes. As the results of these outreach efforts are systematically recorded, the BLM will be able to adjust its management practices as necessary to make sure the values that contribute to the outcomes most desired by the public (which may change over time) receive priority and that the agency effectively retains the public lands for "the long-term needs of future generations" (as envisioned in the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, §103(c)).

## Strategic Focus 2: Maintain an Accurate Inventory of Data.

For decades, the BLM has conducted annual inventories and monitoring at its recreation management areas, sites, roads, and trails. Much of this data has been compiled in the BLM's Recreation Management Information System (RMIS). While extremely valuable, RMIS does not currently interface with the BLM's Geographic Information System (GIS), nor is there a way to verify whether existing data, gathered from the BLM's 133 field offices, were collected using standardized methodologies and reporting tools. By investing in modifications of existing systems such as RMIS, or developing new systems that incorporate the strengths of GIS and other new technologies, the BLM will enhance the quality of data used in land management decisions.

## Goal 3. Transform Communication and Outreach Efforts.

The BLM's Recreation & Visitor Services Program provides the best "first impression" of the BLM's mission for the vast majority of Americans—especially those beyond the industrial and environmental communities with whom the BLM typically works. Under this strategy, the BLM will continue to engage in good communications planning and outreach at levels commensurate with desired outcomes and experiences. Desired outcomes at the field office level will inform and shape national level policies. Recreation staff will be expected to work closely with public affairs staff to shape, expand upon, and distribute the BLM's message contained in outreach efforts.

Strategic Focus 1: Employ a Palette of Interpretive Communication Tools and Technology To Market Recreation Opportunities.

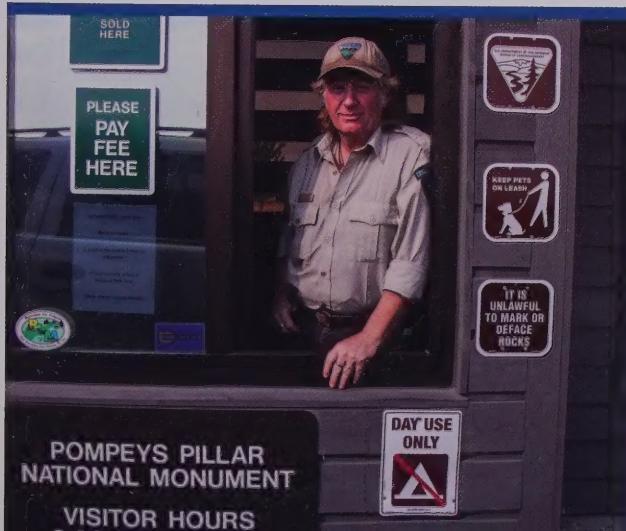
The BLM, along with its partners, should use both print and electronic media (e.g., Internet, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr) to disseminate information about, and market, recreation opportunities. The BLM's recreation and public affairs program staff at all levels are responsible for planning communication efforts well and choosing the tools/technology most appropriate for the targeted customer audience. All offices

are being encouraged to find creative ways of using the power of social media to engage with users and community service providers.

#### **Strategic Focus 2: Access Communications Expertise, As Well As BLM and Partner Social Media, To Improve Message Content and Delivery.**

Most BLM offices have insufficient staffing and funding to develop or distribute definitive and effective outreach content—content that promotes the BLM's recreation-tourism opportunities and recreation brand, promotes the benefits to communities outlined in Resource Management Plans, and otherwise complements the goals described in this strategy. Yet more effective local outreach, as well as national/international exposure, is urgently needed to help users find information about public lands recreation opportunities and plan safe and fun activities, and to help BLM field offices align their desired outcomes with those of communities.

Consequently, field office staff will work with community service providers to tailor and market messages to target audiences. In particular, the BLM will seek to partner with individuals, universities, and organizations that have the means and expertise to measure and articulate the socioeconomic benefits of recreation on public lands and how such benefits contribute to a community's overall health and economic sustainability. This information can then be manifested in a good communications plan. BLM leadership also envisions the BLM's Washington Office and state offices working with national and state tourism organizations and initiatives to advance strategically their message content and distribution.



#### **Goal 4. Establish Secure and Reliable Funding Sources.**

##### **Strategic Focus 1: Use All Funding Sources Available To Maintain Priority Sites and Services.**

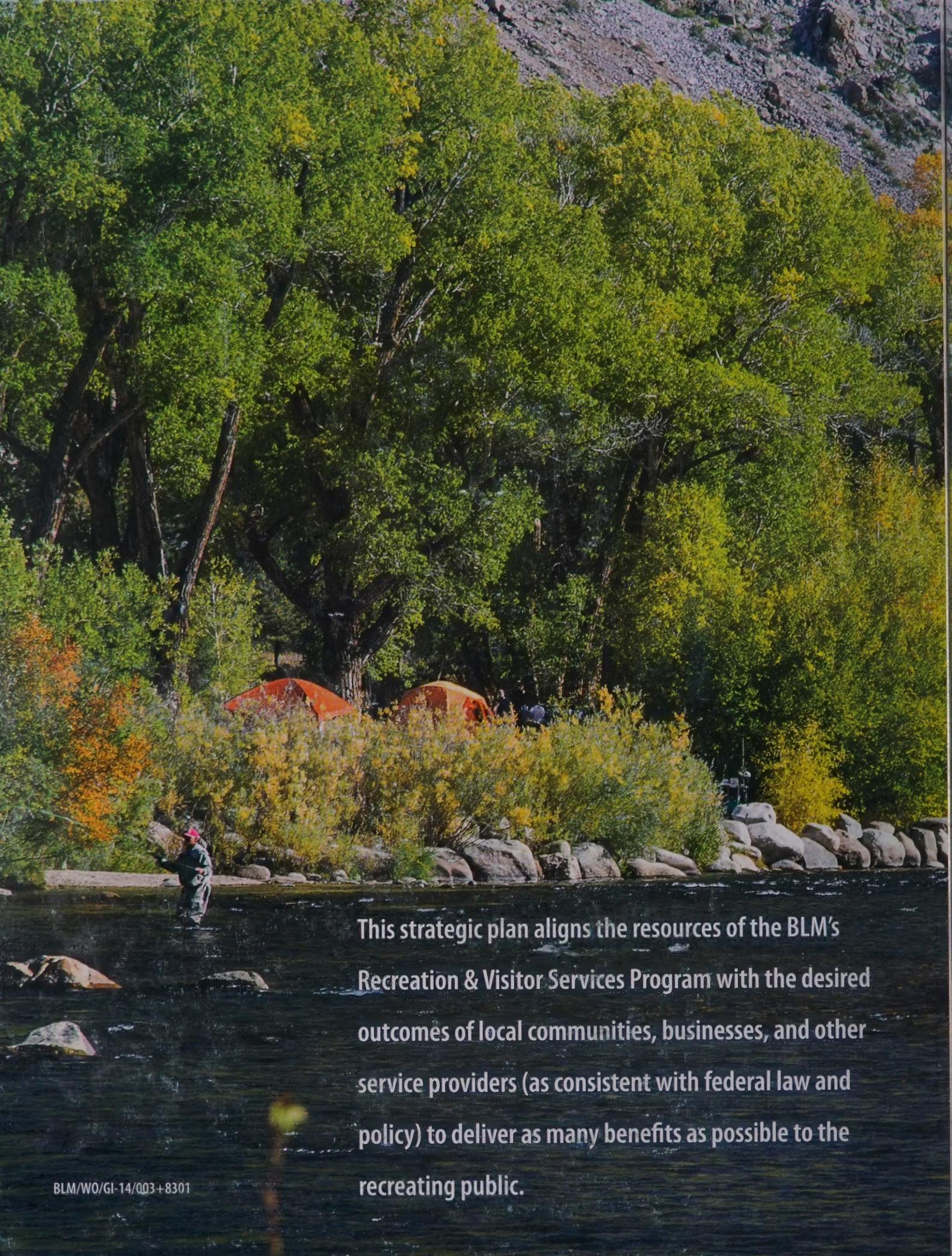
The BLM will continue to rely on appropriated funds to maintain sites, and (subject to guidance from the Office of Management and Budget and from DOI) will ask for funds to maintain sites and services in its annual budget request to Congress. BLM field managers will look for operational efficiencies to gain cost savings at sites and facilities by, for example, evaluating the hours of operation, seasons of use, amenities provided, maintenance contracts, and staffing of all facilities; increasing partnerships, volunteerism, and services through commercial lessees to enhance public recreation and education opportunities; and evaluating sites and facilities for decommissioning where feasible.

The BLM may leverage funds from alternative sources, such as state recreation grant funds (e.g., California's green sticker program) or funds available through the Federal Highway Administration or other federal agencies. When alternative sources of funding are not available or appropriate, the BLM will request funding from Congress to meet critical mission needs.

##### **Strategic Focus 2: Use Collected Fees to Their Maximum Potential To Develop Recreation Benefits.**

Fee revenues will continue to support sites where the fees are collected, improving recreation opportunities in and near the communities where they are located. Field managers can also use fee dollars as an investment that supports the overall recreation and tourism goals of the community. The BLM will improve external communications about fee revenue expenditures by highlighting the fee program's value.





This strategic plan aligns the resources of the BLM's Recreation & Visitor Services Program with the desired outcomes of local communities, businesses, and other service providers (as consistent with federal law and policy) to deliver as many benefits as possible to the recreating public.